



# Caring Hands Humane Society

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## **SEPARATION ANXIETY**

Separation anxiety is often triggered by a high contrast situation, such as months of being home with your dog then suddenly being gone for an extended period of time, or a major life change for the animal.

It is preventable and treatable but can require a major effort on your part depending on the severity of your dogs' anxiety. They have learned to associate certain aspects of your routine that indicate to them you are about to leave so the anxiety begins before you ever walk out the door. Now you must learn to desensitize your dog to these actions.

### **Preventing Separation Anxiety**

A common mistake is smothering your new dog or puppy with constant attention when you first bring them home. It is better to leave them alone for brief periods, step outside for 3-5 minutes several times a day gradually increasing your time alone. This will allow them to see you will be returning. Do not allow them to constantly shadow you around the house using a baby gate to separate the two of you can be very useful.

Keep your dog mentally and physically active, a tired dog is a happy dog. Problem solving will increase your dogs' confidence and independence. Give your dog a Kong toy stuffed with his favorite treat and peanut butter covering the hole so he will have to lick it away to get to his treat. This can be made increasingly harder, therefore more stimulating by hiding several Kong toys around the house requiring him to search for his dinner. Turn this into a game by letting him see where you hide them during his first few days home, giving a verbal command that signals your dog to begin the search. Teach your dog to play Frisbee, Flyball or Agility; he will not only be physically tired but mentally satisfied.

### **Mild Anxiety**

One of the most common mistakes that lead to separation anxiety is making a big deal out of your departure and arrival. Do not smother your dog with affection or use baby talk, departure and arrival should be handled non-chalantly, as a matter of fact.

You must first discover what part of your routine triggers the anxiety to begin. Your dog may be fine when you walk outside in your slippers (he knows you will return right away) but when the work shoes come on he begins to pace or display nervous body actions, he salivates or whines. Maybe everything is fine until your dog hears the jingle of car keys. It may be when he hears the lock turning in the door. Once you have made this identification you must now begin to desensitize your dog to this action.

You must repeatedly begin your routine to the point where your dog first becomes stressed but do not add the subsequent steps or leave. This will teach the dog to relax in the presence of the cues that trigger the anxiety. During this process you must be non-chalant about your actions, when you get to the point that triggers his anxiety sit down and read the paper or go do some house work. Once your dog is relaxed with this process the subsequent steps of your routine can gradually be added, always stop at the point where your dog begins to display nervousness. Eventually you will make it to the point of actually walking out the door for one minute and then return, remember this will be a big deal for you but your dog must not see it that way. DO NOT smoothen him with attention when you walk back in. Over time you will work up to a normal length of absence.

The hardest part for you will be the duration of this treatment. Your dog can not experience absences in day to day life that are longer than the point he has reached in treatment exercises. This means that early on in treatment your dog can not be left alone. You might have to employ a dog sitter or re-arrange some vacation time, use a doggy day care or bring your dog to work with you.

### **KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER**

- During treatment, absences longer than your current level of desensitization should be suspended. If you must leave your dog alone you should consider anti-anxiety medication
- A great deal of your time will be spent getting over the first few hurdles and it will be frustrating, just hang in there
- Longer training sessions work better than short ones; you make put your shoes on and off 50 times during one session.
- Never move to the next level until your dog shows no anxiety at his current level, occasionally you may have to bump down a level.
- Keep departures and greetings non-chalant
- Temporary regression is normal, simply go back to the easy steps to get your dog successful again
- You will spend a lot of time working on desensitizing your dog to the rituals that predict your departure, don't jump ahead to any departures until this is thoroughly accomplished

CHHS Staff